

Challenges facing university museums

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Resumo

Algumas universidades parecem mostrar entusiasmo em abraçar novos desafios, nomeadamente a tutela cultural de museus e de teatros. Os museus, em particular, há muito que fazem parte integrante dos campus e resultam de colecções de ensino especialmente nos domínios das ciências e das humanidades – desde herbários a colecções médicas até antiguidades e colecções de arte. Na realidade, as colecções de arte constituíram-se por vezes independentemente das actividades de ensino das universidades, colocando questões sobre a sua inserção nas funções nucleares de uma universidade contemporânea.

Abstract

Universities have apparently enthusiastically embraced new ventures in taking on responsibilities for cultural institutions, such as museums and theatres. Museums, especially, have long been integral to campuses, growing out of teaching collections, particularly in fields of science and the humanities – for herbaria and medical collections on the one hand and antiquities and art collections on the other. Indeed, art collections have occasionally developed independently from the teaching and learning functions of universities, posing questions about their 'fit' with the core business of the contemporary, corporate university.

The overarching theme for this conference is 'Managing Change: the museum facing economic and social challenges'. I want to explore one aspect of this theme in terms of the challenges facing museums as they develop more appropriate roles in the university environment, part economic, part social and somewhat political.

My field of practice is in contemporary visual arts and my research in patterns of patronage in the middle ages, so I have a bias towards the arts. However, having worked in the university sector

now for five and a half years, four as an academic and one and a half as the Director of the Cultural Precinct at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, I know the challenges facing our museum are to secure our academic position in the university, rather than focus on competition in the museological sector of the cultural industries.

While preparing to attend ICOM 2001 and UMAC's first meeting, I bought a large book by expatriate Australian writer and art critic Robert Hughes, titled *Barcelona*, published in 1992. Introducing his text,

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Hughes notes that his book of more than 500 pages was “meant to be thinner”. He intended to write about this city’s *modernista* or art nouveau period (roughly 1875 – 1910), concentrating on the city’s architecture. However, Hughes realised that “so much of what was built in Barcelona in the late-nineteenth century was grounded in a strong, even obsessive, sense of the Catalan past, in particular its medieval past, that there was little point in trying to describe the newer without the older” (HUGHES 1992: ix).

While Hughes’s comments provide a generous appreciation of the built heritage of Barcelona, they remind us that the historical perspective is critical for contemporary understanding of form and function. So I will start by briefly exploring the environment in which university museums have developed, before turning to consider the challenges of future directions.

Writing in 1972 in the book *Museums in crisis*, John Spencer claimed:

“College and university museums have arrived at their present position through a series of accidents but accidents need not control their future existence. The peculiarly American concept of the [university] art museum as a means of education brought them into being and determined the direction of their growth. Their desire to emulate the large city museums has raised a few to enviable heights but will lead only to frustration for the greater majority” (SPENCER 1972: 142).

Spencer’s paper ‘The university museum: Accidental past, purposeful future?’ concluded that university museums “have a more important role to play than they have yet recognised” (SPENCER 1972: 143).

Those big city museums that we may strive to emulate were largely developed to exploit a political purpose. Medieval dukes and princes of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe amassed lavish collections of works of art to proclaim their political powers,

becoming great patrons of architects, sculptors, painters and weavers. In so doing, they heightened secular patronage to rival that previously enjoyed by the church. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was the world’s great museums that usurped the status of the princely collections and their purpose too was frequently political. As Neil Macgregor, Director of the National Gallery London, noted recently when in Australia, the collections housed in the Louvre were intended to become the outward reflection of Napoleon’s dreams of European domination.

By contrast, there is no real European model for university museums. Indeed, SPENCER (1972: 133) pointed out three decades ago, many still “resembled Yale Museum of 1870 with a strong desire to teach and precious little to teach with”. Without the good fortune or astute skills to secure major gifts and collections, university museums are doomed in their efforts to ape national scientific and historical or civic art museums if they depend on their collections alone.

The Cultural Precinct at QUT, of which I am founding director, is located on our campus at Gardens Point, in the heart of the city of Brisbane. Last year, 58,000 people visited the Cultural Precinct, despite the museum not opening until mid-May.

The precinct includes a newly-created space for an art museum, now housing our collection of some 1,700 works. The collection started in 1945 as an adjunct to the teaching programs at the university, with the trainee teachers contributing weekly from their salaries to purchase works of art. Many artists teaching at the Teachers College, as it was then, also gave their work to the collection. Our Art Museum takes up the refurbished ground floor of the Chancellery, a classical columned building of 1937 treated in the Renaissance manner, and provides some 1,000 square metres of exhibition galleries, collection storage and office accommodation.

Close by is the Gardens Theatre, also part of the Cultural Precinct, a 400-seat theatre that the university acquired when the conservatorium relocated from Gardens Point to the south side of the city, across the Brisbane River. Since 1999, the University has refurbished the theatre, built an adjoining spacious foyer and completely rebuilt backstage to provide up-to-date dressing rooms, rehearsal studio, biobox and technical facilities. Major Australian architectural awards to both the Art Museum and the Theatre recognise the elegance and sophistication of these new facilities.

Located between the Museum and the Theatre is Old Government House, a gracious stone building operated by the National Trust of Queensland, the



Fig. 1 – Queensland University of Technology Cultural Precinct, Gardens Theatre (Photo courtesy QUT).

residence of the first governor of Queensland after the state separated from New South Wales in 1859.

It is a rewarding challenge to be creating cultural institutions for the performing as well as the visual arts, especially in a university that has enthusiastically embraced the current development of creative industries and innovation. I want to turn now to these recent policy directions that address agendas for innovation and creativity.

In a green paper released a few months ago – *Backing Australia's Ability* – innovation is outlined as the “development of skills, generation of new ideas through research, turning them to commercial success [as] key to Australia’s future prosperity” (COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA 2001: 3). To address the future in these terms is to acknowledge contemporary interest in the concept of creative industries. British policy has taken similar directions.

Britain’s Blair Government coined the term ‘Creative Industries’, in 1997. In March 2001, the Blair Government outlined four key objectives for the creative industries, as drivers of the new economy: i) excellence; ii) access; iii) education; and iv) the creative economy.

Education has been a core function of the modern museum, particularly for those located within universities. Excellence and access, however, are the somewhat tired catch cries of the cultural policies of the early 90s – to recall those that I know of from Canada and Australia for example. What is new in their agenda is the concept of the creative economy that has been slowly taking shape over the past decade. The term creative industries has gained currency as “a usefully different way of thinking about creativity in the new, knowledge-based economy” (CUNNINGHAM 2001: 11). Professor Stuart Cunningham, head of the Creative Industries

Research and Applications Centre at QUT has provocatively asked “What’s so new about it? Isn’t it just arts and media business as usual – with some peppy branding?” In response, Cunningham has suggested that the concept of creative industries “can help [...] practitioners to think of creativity as part and parcel of the research and development base, the R&D of the country, and move beyond disabling models of straight subsidy for the arts and passive consumerism for mass entertainment and information media.” (CUNNINGHAM 2001: 11).

At Queensland University of Technology, one of Australia’s largest with 30,000 students and a workforce of approximately 3,500 across three campuses, taking on the rhetoric of the creative industries has been central to our re-examination of the role of the humanities in the University.

Queensland University of Technology is a university of technology. Some of the so-called ‘pure’ humanities sit awkwardly with our technology bias. Yesterday, 1 July 2001, the Creative Industries Faculty was launched at QUT, replacing the Faculty of the Arts and giving a new focus to the humanities. Some humanities subjects will no longer be taught at QUT. The focus will be on others, especially in the fields of the ‘content’ industries – such as publishing, film, broadcasting, music and interactive software – and performance – including dance, drama and visual arts – that have the potential to contribute to wealth and job creation through the exploitation of intellectual property.

Where does our university museum fit in this new environment? In Australia, two reports on university museums were undertaken in 1996 and 1998, published as *Cinderella Collections* and *Transforming Cinderella Collections* (UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS REVIEW COMMITTEE 1996, 1998). Professor Di Yerbury was chair, and Dr Peter Stanbury secretary, of the task force, a joint

initiative of the federal government and the Australian Vice-Chancellor’s Committee, initiated by CAUMAC, the Council of Australian University Museums and Collections at its formation in 1992. The principal objectives of the reviews were to discuss and formulate museum and collection policies, providing for establishment, continued existence and disposal of university museums, collections and herbaria. In all, two hundred and seventy six Australian university collections were identified. A further objective was to *recognise* those collections to be maintained in the long term; and to identify items of national and international significance. In 1998, eighty-five of the 276 collections were identified as being important to the work of the university in which they were housed.

Taking the *recognition* factor – that is what is important to the work of the university – in the context of the political discussion of the creative industries and ‘content development’ is critical in my thinking about future directions for the Art Museum and the Gardens Theatre at QUT. For the QUT Art Museum to add value to our University, we need to put our University into our Museum – and to exploit our university connections, rather than hankering after the environment of the civic museum.

The greatest challenge is that our most important role may not be to be subservient to the teaching needs of the faculties. As SPENCER (1972) pointed out, by and large our collections, with rare exceptions, do not have sufficient scale to provide comprehensive teaching resources. Yet, for most university museums the relationship of museum programs to curriculum and teaching are key performance indicators.

In 1999 our principal role was identified to support the University’s commitment to serve the community of Brisbane and the people of Queensland. In achieving this, we have, for example, developed



Fig. 2 – Queensland University of Technology Cultural Precinct, Art Museum (Photo courtesy QUT).

community programs drawing on the University's research on children's patterns of learning in museums. We are planning a new public program aimed at supporting research on lifestyle and social adjustments that retirees must make during their first few years living in communal retirement villages.

These successes aside, I see quite an expanded role that we should develop for our university. We are a gateway between the community and the University and our public interface provides an opportunity to develop public outcomes for university research in fields of the creative industries.

In closing, I want to return briefly to those other museums outside the university sector. The civic museum oscillates between what has been called

"highly didactic displays" (SOMERS COCKS 2001: 21) in which the narrative subverts the role of the object, forcing it to play second fiddle to its contextualisation, and what I call the 'theme park, Disney' approach to display and programming. In recognising the marginalisation of the object, Anna Somers Cocks recently noted that "the container has become as important as the contained [...] [and that] architects have never been so much part of museum life as now" (SOMERS COCKS 2001: 20). Moreover, she remarked that largely due to the success of cities – like Barcelona – in stimulating its economy and regional pride through cultural policies, museums are now saddled with overtly political agendas to generate civic (including architectural) pride and identity. Canada has gone as far as to develop cultural policies as the fourth arm of foreign policy, a way of thinking that supports the development of

cultural export for highly strategic and political ends.

Whatever we as museum professionals may think of such directions, the performance outputs of many civic museum are amazingly impressive – the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao can claim extraordinary visitation, a significant input to the city's economic development since its opening in 1997 and an impressive contribution to the city's architectural heritage. University museums aren't exempt from delivering such social and economic benefits, though in the majority of cases, the results are less spectacular. In her retiring address to the Australian Press Club, the chair of the Australia Council, Professor Margaret Seares, commented that cultural development has been perceived as "peripheral in terms of whole-of-government thinking" (SEARES 2001: 11).

Despite the *Cinderella* reviews and their seminal analysis in recognising the work of those Australian museums that contribute to their universities, university museums in particular have been largely perceived as peripheral in terms of the tertiary sector's role in education. They are acknowledged for their contribution to the university's status in society and rarely for their pedagogical influence.

In times of tight, fiscal accountability, such peripheral activity can be too easily lopped off the university's agenda – and indeed possibly should be if the deliverables are not a close 'fit' with the university's corporate goals.

Along with their civic agendas, university museums can no longer afford to ignore their unique strength – their particular academic environment.

To conclude, SPENCER (1972: 139) exhorted us last century that each university museum should exist on its own unique terms and "should consider carefully its place in [its] university, [its] community and [its] region and then set its goals for its own unique situation." Spencer encouraged us to believe that rather than go for homogeneity, a greater diversity was needed in the roles adopted by university museums. "Few" he said "have attempted to exploit the strength of their position. Few have recognised the resources available to them. [...] By breaking out of the stereotype of the campus museum [...] they can create a future directed by reason rather than by chance." (SPENCER 1972: 143).

At QUT, we intend to create our future by focusing on the strength of our position in the university research environment. We have already secured our first research grant to investigate creative practice as research in communication design, the visual and performing arts. We are also showcasing university research to the public in new and exciting ways. While we still intend to measure our visitation rates, numbers of exhibitions and loans of objects, we will be drawing on the strength of our academic position, and in association with the Creative Industries Faculty, will put university priorities securely into our museum's future development.

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